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Responding to Student Writing: Motivate, Not Criticise

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Abstract

This paper proposes the idea that a teacher can motivate students in the writing class through the type of feedback he or she provides to students written works. This idea, which is partly based on findings of previous studies and partly on the writers classroom experience, report that students feel better motivated to engage in writing activities when they perceive their teachers to be more interested in what they have to say than in their language accuracy. The paper contends that too many error corrections can be discouraging to the learner writer. It supports the notion that teacher response should focus mainly on content. Two major approaches of responding to content are discussed. The first is directive feedback, which is generally felt to be ineffective in promoting autonomous learning. Instructional and evaluative comments are examples of directive feedback. The second and the desired approach is facilitative feedback. In this approach, teachers give comments in the form of ideas, opinions and suggestions all of which portray the teachers as interested readers. Such an approach is learner-centred and promotes autonomous learning, thereby increasing the level of motivation in the students.

Introduction

Teachers need to acknowledge that both writing abilities and the levels of intrinsic motivation between students differ as much as their individual personality traits. In worrying about the requirement of having to prepare all the students for the same exam, teachers cannot assume that the weaker students would somehow catch up or improve in their composing abilities through the numerous writing tasks designed for the general population of students. Teachers should strive to identify the individual writing needs and motivation levels of each student, and subsequently adapt their teaching approaches to suit these individual needs. However, given that on the average, a teacher of English as a Second Language (ESL) in a Malaysian classroom usually has to teach about 5 classes, with 45 students in each class, individual attention may sound like an improbable luxury, more so when writing is allocated a maximum of two hours only in a week. Since time constraint does not permit a one-to-one writing conference between teacher and student (in the Malaysian context), writing teachers are left with only one realistic option in trying to reach out to students on an individual basis, that is, through written response to the students written works (referred to in this paper as teacher response).

Responding to student writing is, in fact, an indispensable procedure in a process-oriented writing curriculum. But even in a product-oriented curriculum, which is still prevalent in Malaysian schools, teacher response can play a key role in the teaching of writing. The importance of teacher response is aptly summed up by Straub (1996: p.246), "It is how we receive and respond to student writing that speaks loudest in our teaching."

The purpose of this paper is to argue that teachers of ESL (especially in Malaysia) can use the responding process to not only guide students in their writing, but also to motivate them. The paper will begin by reviewing the literature on teacher response, specifically on what scholars say about error correction. This is followed by an explanation of the need to get teachers to emphasize on content and in doing so, to adopt a facilitative style of responding rather than a directive one. To support this argument, the paper will then illustrate how some facilitative techniques of responding comply with motivation theories.

The importance of teacher response

The first thing that a teacher should realize about teacher response is that it is not something that happens at the end of a writing task, but that it is something that happens continuously throughout the teaching and writing processes. Teachers who comment on a students written work just so the student has the satisfaction of knowing that the work has been read are grossly misjudging the role of teacher response in the teaching of writing.

The strength of teacher response lies in the fact that written response offers the teacher the option of personalizing his/her comments. Individual strengths and weaknesses can be addressed and communicated directly to the learner concerned. In spite of the value of teacher response, research has shown that written feedback is often not given the attention it deserves by writing teachers. For many teachers, responding to student writing has become a mechanical activity, an activity that takes place in the natural course of events in a writing class. Sommers (1982), and a few others who conducted their research in a second language environment like Cohen and Cavalcanti (1990), Keh (1990), Hyland (1990), Kepner (1991), Mahili (1994), Ferris (1995), report that many teachers treat the teacher response stage as a copy editing stage, focusing mostly on the correction of grammar errors in student compositions.

The error hunt

In two early notable studies, Sommers (1982) and later Zamel (1985) found that even teachers who taught writing to native speakers are generally preoccupied with error correction, which in turn result in the revision process being reduced to a mere proofreading venture. Those who conducted their research in a second language environment, like Searle and Dillon (1980a and 1980b), Lamberg (1980), Knoblauch and Brannon (1982), Robbs, Ross and Shortreed (1986) and Hull (1987) contend that even detailed feedback on form (grammar) is not really worth the teachers time and effort. In a nationwide study in America involving 21,000 teachers, Connors and Lunsford (1993) found that, while teachers were paying more attention to content, a large number of them felt that correcting errors is a major concern when responding to

student writing. Things are not very much different in the local front, where the product approach is still widely accepted as the most practical approach in schools. Lau (1990) in her graduation exercise at the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, found that most L2 teachers responding to the written works of fourth formers, responded mostly to form (grammar) and very little to content. In 1996, I conducted a study that focused on the responding behaviour of three writing teachers. The teachers taught writing as a component subject of an ESL course to students at a Malaysian centre for pre-university studies. Two of the three teachers demonstrated a strong predisposition to correcting errors when responding to their students compositions, while the third managed to balance her comments between error correction and content development. Of the comments made by all three teachers in relation to the content of the compositions, most were in the form of short phrases and questions that gave instructions for revision and requested for information, respectively (Ravichandran, 1996).

Research has revealed several reasons why teachers feel compelled to correct errors. The teachers in my study reported that they feel duty bound to correct the errors. Failing to do so could mean a loss of credibility. Kepner (1991) explains that teachers also correct errors out of the fear that the erroneous structures would become fossilized in the students. Like the rest of the researchers, Kepner too calls for teacher response that attends more to content. Keh (1990) offers a different explanation altogether, that is, teachers embark on an error hunt as red ink corrections have great face value when a headmaster decides to check a teacher's work.

Effects of error correction

While the above reasons provide a fair justification for teachers' tendency to correct errors, teachers should also be aware of the possible effects of error correction on their students, especially in a second language learning environment like in Malaysian schools. For one, in the case of a struggling student, receiving a corrected draft from a teacher with red ink smeared all over the page would only add to the student's apprehension level when he or she attempts another writing task. Secondly, a large amount of error correction only succeeds in drawing the student's attention to form only and not to the more important matter of developing the content. This encourages students to view their essays as fixed pieces, requiring no textual revisions (see Sommers, 1982). As a result, there is little motivation for students to develop their skills in the areas of content and organization as the essay task is reduced to another means of achieving linguistic accuracy.

A shift in emphasis

Teachers should only make a decision on how to respond to their students' writing after considering the objectives of the writing curriculum. Most writing programmes, regardless of language status, are designed to promote knowledge of writing principles rather than accuracy in the language itself. Gilbert (1990) contends that, response to writing must begin at content, no matter how deficient a draft may be in form. In spite of the value of correct expression, learner writers often need to learn the basic principles of writing before they can fine-tune the language.

Responding to content

If teachers of ESL are to heed the call by researchers to focus more on the content when responding to student writing, the question that needs to be answered then would be, how can they do that without adding to the anxiety of a student who is trying to achieve linguistic accuracy? Dunn, Florio-Ruane and Clark (1989) and Hyland (1990) state that, when responding, teachers should provide a platform from which students themselves can reassess and redraft their work. Hyland (1990) and Mahili (1994) call for detailed and informative comments on content. These are comments that allow the teachers to reach out to the students. This means that short, questioning remarks, placed in-between sentences would be obviously inadequate. Instead, teachers should attempt to enter into a dialogue with the students. To do that, the nature of the comments should be such that, they reflect teachers as interested readers, and not as judges or evaluators. Comments of this nature, besides giving a clear picture of what the student needs to do, also respond to the students themselves and not just to their writing. Simply put, teachers should strive to give comments that facilitate student revision and improvement. Facilitative comments are different from directive comments in that facilitative comments do not attempt to take control of the students work, nor does it attempt to pass judgements on it. Directive comments, which can be defined as comments in the form of instructions and questions (though not necessarily negative in nature), could result in the students losing ownership of their work, as they try to accommodate their teachers comments when revising (see Straub, 1996).

Another type of comment that can be considered as facilitative is praise (sometimes referred to as positive comments). Students need to know when they are doing something right. Teaching students to write involves pointing out the strengths as well as the weaknesses. Therefore, incidents of effective developments in the content of an essay deserve some form of praise from the teacher. In fact, students report that they feel discouraged when they dont receive positive comments (Ferris, 1995).

Types of directive and facilitative comments

In my case study (Ravichandran, 1996), I found that, basically, teacher comments on content could be grouped into five categories (see table below). Of these five categories, three can be identified as being distinctly directive (evaluative, instructional and questioning comments). Straub (1997), refers to such comments as controlling comments (but he uses criticisms to refer to evaluative comments and commands to refer to instructional comments) as such comments exert the teachers control over the students work, while at the same time reducing the students own control. Corrections are also deemed as controlling by Straub.

According to Straub, students in his study preferred comments of an advisory nature most of all, followed by praise. In my study, Ive categorized these comments as teachers own opinions and ideas and as positive comments respectively. Straub reports that the students in his study found these type of comments most helpful of all when they revised their essays, hence my use of the term facilitative for them (refer table).

Category	Definition	Example
Directive		
Evaluative comments	Comments of a judgemental nature, describing students writing competence	Weak Intro Topic sentence is too general
Instructional comments	Comments that serve to teach, or instruct students to make changes	Be direct and clear Dont give an advice in your conclusion Link this point to the topic sentence
Questioning comments (comments seeking clarification)	Comments that seek further information from students	Incomplete What do you mean? Can you elaborate on this?
Facilitative		
Teachers own opinions and ideas	Comments that express the teachers opinions or suggestions	I feel it would be better if you omitted this point I think
Positive comments (Praise)	Comments that point out the strong parts of the essay. Encouragement.	Good point The main idea is well supported here

To avoid an overlap between the first and fifth categories, I placed only the negative evaluations in the first category. Positive evaluations were grouped together with other positive comments (praises). Interestingly, most of the comments given by the teachers in my study to their students written works were directive in nature. This finding was consistent with the findings of an interview that I conducted with the students, who perceived the roles of their writing teachers to be that of judges rather than interested readers (Ravichandran, 1996).

Facilitative response techniques and motivation in learning

It should be noted that the facilitative and the directive approaches are by no means, mutually exclusive. It is not my contention that a solely facilitative approach would bring about the desired results in the teaching and learning of writing in Malaysian schools. I am sure directive feedback has its place in the responding process. However, my contention is that the facilitative approach could provide the much-needed motivation to our students who are struggling to become better writers. Motivation in learning can be achieved not when teachers tell students exactly what to do (directive response), but when teachers return the responsibility to the students themselves to identify the relevant areas and improve on the shortcomings of their work. By doing so, students can take full credit for any improvements they make (McBride, 2000). The facilitative approach in responding allows the teacher to return control over a piece of writing back to the student, and at the same time guide that student to make meaningful revisions to his/her work. To better illustrate the link between the facilitative approach to responding and motivation, I would like to draw

upon three techniques of facilitative response, suggested by Hyland (1990), Charles (1990), and Johnstone (1990). The following discussion will show how these techniques of facilitative response are in compliance with several cognitive theories of motivation in learning.

Compliance with motivation theories

Three theories of motivation are discussed here: Weiners attribution theory (1979), Banduras (1977) self-efficacy theory, and the more recent self-determination theory by Deci (1991).

Weiners attribution theory (1979) stresses on the importance of teaching in ways that assures learners that their success depends on factors they control. The process of learning is given more importance than the product of learning. The facilitative feedback approach emphasizes the need to revise a piece of writing until the student is satisfied with the product. Hyland (1990) proposes a method of feedback that does just this. He calls it, interactive feedback. Teacher response is detailed, natural, and informative. In this technique, students are allowed to respond to the teachers comments, thereby participating in a written dialogue with the teacher. Not all of the teacher feedback is in the written mode. Hyland also suggests that teachers could tape-record their comments and give this to the students to add a personal touch to their feedback.

The self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1977) underscores the importance of helping learners to set their own goals and acquire learning strategies to enhance self-efficacy beliefs and intrinsic motivation. Charles (1990) and Johnstone (1990) both worked out similar techniques of responding that allow the students to set their own goals and acquire learning strategies. Charles proposes a student self-monitoring technique, while Johnstone proposes a learner-centred feedback. Both these techniques involve the students annotating their essays with comments and queries on their problem areas. The only difference between the two techniques is that Johnstone limits the number of options students have when they make their queries. In other words, the students decide what they want from the teacher with regard to feedback. The teacher then responds in writing to these notes. Besides allowing the students to set their own goals, the self-monitoring and the learner-centred techniques encourage students to look critically and analytically at their own writing, thereby allowing the students to assume responsibility for what they write.

All three techniques discussed thus far, Hyland's interactive feedback, Charles' student self-monitoring technique, and Johnstone's learner-centred feedback, also comply with the requirements of the self-determination theory (Deci, 1991). This theory tells us that, underlying intrinsic motivation is an attitude of self-determination to accomplish a goal. And this involves the fulfillment of three needs, which are, competence needs, relationship needs, and autonomy needs. In the facilitative feedback approach, the students assume the responsibility for the development of their written tasks, with the teacher acting as a guide. This should boost the students confidence in their own abilities, and provide the necessary motivation to improve (theoretically speaking). Relationship needs are also fulfilled with the teacher assuming the role of an interested reader, and not the role of the impersonal judge, thereby creating a supportive environment for the students to learn. As students

regain control over their works, their sense of autonomy is also enhanced. The notion of autonomy here does not mean to be left to learn completely on ones own. Instead, it is the ability of the students to choose one of several options available to them (which may or may not be provided by the teachers) when revising.

Having shown that there is theoretical support to my contention that facilitative types of feedback could provide the much-needed motivation to our students, my advice to ESL teachers, at least in the Malaysian context, is that it is time they put away their red-inked correction pens and assumed a much friendlier role when responding to their students compositions. Rather than repeatedly remind students of their linguistic inadequacies, I think Malaysian ESL teachers would find that giving facilitative comments to student compositions could yield surprising results. In my own classroom experiences in the past five years, I have noticed that, initially, most students want and even expect me to respond only to their grammar. However, many are pleasantly surprised to discover that I show little concern for their linguistic inaccuracies (not that I am not concerned about grammar problems, I simply use other means of addressing them usually by discussing common and repetitive errors with the whole class). By the end of the term, I find that most students do not only make improvements in organization and development of the content in their compositions, but also tend to write longer compositions.

Conclusion

This paper discussed why and how Malaysian teachers should change the way in which they respond to students compositions. I have argued that teachers often do not recognize the value of teacher response in the teaching of writing. As a result, most teachers treat the responding activity as an error correction activity, and in the process, demoralize learner writers in their writing attempts. The review of past research suggests that writing teachers, especially those in a second language environment, should shift their focus from error correction to content development when responding to student compositions, and in doing so, adopt a facilitative approach. Facilitative response is seen as motivating to students, given the nature of teacher comments that advise and suggest. On the other hand, directive response in the form of instructions causes students to lose control over their work, with the possible effect of students feeling demotivated. The theoretical support for this argument is evident in the compliance of several facilitative techniques of response with the motivational theories put forward by Weiner (1979), Bandura (1977) and Deci (1991).

Implicit in the argument that we can motivate students to write by allowing them to take responsibility for their own work through our facilitative comments is that, students will eventually become better writers by doing so. Though this is very much the goal of all writing programmes, teachers of ESL in Malaysian classrooms should not assume that they could start seeing results immediately after adopting a facilitative approach to responding. Like any other language skill, good writing ability comes only with practice. By being facilitative in our response, we encourage our students to not only engage in writing, but also to enjoy writing. Once we can motivate students to this extent, we can expect learning to occur naturally.

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Biodata

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